Title: Belle Prairie Civil War Veteran

By: Dale C. Maley

A descendant of Eugene Wilbur Convis (1851-1938) recently found a folder with several exciting items. One of the items was a 1982 Blade photo showing Mr. Convis and Mr. Mundt as Civil War veterans circa 1916. The other four items in the folder were ribbons given to someone who attended Civil War veteran reunions.

The first ribbon was undated for the 89th Illinois Infantry, and the attendee was an ex-prisoner of war of Andersonville and Millen prisons. The second ribbon was for attending the 18th annual encampment in 1884 at Decatur. The third ribbon was for attending the 13th Annual Reunion of the Illinois Association of Ex-Prisoners of War held at Farmer City on October 21-22 in 1891. The fourth ribbon was undated and was for attending the 8th annual reunion of the 89th Illinois.

These four ribbons indicate that the person who attended these meetings was a former member of the 89th Illinois Infantry and was a prisoner of war at Andersonville and Millen prisons.

Nobody in the descendant's family was aware that Eugene Convis was a Civil War veteran. His 1938 obituary in the Blade had no mention of him being a Civil War veteran. There is no mention in the Blade of his military service except the circa 1916 photo of Mr. Mundt and Mr. Convis being Civil War veterans.

Mr. Convis was born in Plattville in Kendall County in 1851. Plattville is a tiny town about 20 miles west of Joliet. The father of Mr. Convis died in 1857 when Eugene Convis was just six years old. The Civil War started in 1861 and ended in 1865, so Mr. Convis would have been age 10 to age 14 if he served in the Civil War. Mr. Mundt from Fairbury was just 15 when he enlisted in the Union Army. The youngest known enlistee was just eight years old.

Although the official minimum enlistment age was 18, there were at least two ways for younger men to enlist. The first method was to lie about your age, especially if you looked older than your age. In that era, it was easy to lie about one's age, especially given that modern methods of identification (social security, driver's license, computer databases) did not exist. Some underage boys were able to enlist with the endorsement of an adult. A father could vouch for his son's work ethic and shooting ability, and the recruiter then accepted the son into a unit.

Despite such workarounds, many other boys joined the military legitimately by signing up for non-combat positions. Many such youths signed up as musicians (such as drummers, buglers, flutists). There were places for 40,000 such jobs in the Union Armies alone. These young boys often performed other tasks, such as carrying canteens, bandages, and stretchers, to assist surgeons and nurses with the wounded. These boys

also relayed orders on the battlefield, and at least a few picked up rifles and participated in the fighting.

The 89th Illinois Infantry Company H was formed in Platteville, where Mr. Convis lived before he moved to Belle Prairie. Since his father was dead, the Civil War offered a way for him to support himself. Company H fought in many battles, and in one skirmish, 50 of their members were captured and sent to Andersonville Prison.

During the Civil War, the Confederacy set up a prisoner of war camp in Andersonville, Georgia. This camp developed the reputation for the worst prisoner-of-war camp on either the Confederacy or Union sides. Of the approximately 45,000 Union prisoners held at Andersonville during the war, nearly 13,000 died, giving a 29% death rate.

There were two primary reasons that Andersonville was the worst prison camp in the Civil War. The first reason was that President Lincoln stopped prisoner exchanges between the Union and the Confederacy. They were stopped because the Confederacy would not include captured African American soldiers fighting for the Union in the exchange program. With no way to exchange prisoners, the number of prisoners at Andersonville quickly exceeded the camp's capacity.

The second primary reason Andersonville was so deadly was the lack of food leading to starvation and disease. The Confederate army did not have enough food for their fighting soldiers, let alone food for prisoners of war.

Camp Lawton, or Millen Prison, was established during the Civil War in the fall of 1864 by the Confederate Army to house Union prisoners of war. The Confederacy selected the Magnolia Springs site to take advantage of the abundant water supply. Built by slave labor and a group of Union prisoners of pine timber harvested on-site, the walls measured 12 to 15 feet high. The stockade began receiving the first of at least 10,299 prisoners in early October. The post was abandoned by the end of November when it was threatened by General Sherman's drive on Savannah.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Eugene Convis moved from Plattville to Belle Prairie Township south of Fairbury. He became a farmer. In 1878, at the age of 27, Eugene Convis married 25-year-old Mary Jane Magee. She was born in 1853 in Manvers, Canada. Eugene and Mary Convis had three children.

The first child of Eugene and Mary Convis was Albert Orlando Convis. He married Ruth Belle McCullough. The second child was Eva May Convis, and she married John Washington McCullough. The third child was Cora Belle Convis, and she married Fred Blaine Elliott.

Mary Convis died in 1918 at the age of 65 in Cropsey. Eugene Convis passed away in 1938 at the age of 87. Both Mary and Eugene Convis were buried in Cropsey.

If Eugene Convis served in the Union Army during the Civil War, his story is unique. What makes his story unique is his young age, the ability to survive through many brutal battles, and his ability to survive the dreaded Andersonville Prison as well as Millen Prison. Hopefully, additional information will someday become available that corroborates the fascinating story of young Eugene Convis serving in the Civil War.